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SKILLED LABOR & THE PURITAN HERITAGE



HAMMERMEN

From an etching by the author

SKILLED LABOR

The Puritan Heritage

By ROY GRIFFITH



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The Puritan Heritage

THOSE who picture the Puritan as bringing to America the blessings of religious tolerance and democratic government do him a double disservice. They make him appear what he was not, and they obscure what he was. They do New England no good, for they invest her with a smug self-righteousness in the reflected light of Puritan doctrine, and slight her far greater contribution to the nation in the heritage of Puritan integrity and skill. In this respect the most conservative New Englander can appreciate the exasperated regret of the West that "Plymouth Rock didn't land on the Pilgrims instead of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock." The Fathers have been much overdone, and in the wrong direction, inaccurately for them and detrimentally to us. We can be justly proud of their best, and that is what remains to us; the rest remains with history and might preferably remain there.

The Puritans, in their way, had democratic ideas, but



not to the extent enthusiastic appraisers of the Mayflower Compact would have us believe, nor out of any real conviction of the brotherhood of man. They distrusted the class system because they had been oppressed by it, and because they themselves came almost altogether from a single class. The church and government of England were composed of the nobility and gentry. The royal army (the trainbands and militia having espoused the cause of Parliament) was a half hereditary, half conscript compound of noblemen and thieves, the extremes of the social scale. The democracy of the Puritans was therefore a class interest rather than a mass interest, a selective rather than an inclusive democracy.

More than that, it was basically religious. Democracy or toleration outside of his own faith the Puritan neither aspired to nor believed in; everybody else, to his view, was an Amalekite whom the Puritan God would smite hip and thigh through his chosen ministers, as soon as He found occasion. If the Puritan came here for "freedom to worship God," it was for freedom to worship God in the Puritan way, and anybody who took any other form of freedom in the matter was lucky to escape with his ears. In the choicest vintage of malignant and intolerant fanatics that history affords, the Puritan ministry of Boston and Salem holds no mean place. Puritan religious freedom



was no more religious freedom than was the religious oppression the Puritans had come here to escape. Religious freedom in America began not in New England but in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The Puritan government, in the same way, gave civil liberty to Puritans and no others. The Puritans fought the union of church and state under which they were compelled to live in England; but they established a union of church and state under which they compelled everybody else to live in America; and from which they banished Roger Williams for having the temerity to oppose it.

Puritanism developed its least intolerant and most democratic form among the Pilgrims, first because they were a small body composed almost without exception of poor folk and artisans, with the sense of a common cause; and second, because they had lived for a time in Holland, where they became familiar with religious liberalism and republican ideals. Not as familiar as they might have become, to everybody's advantage, had they chose; but as familiar as they could, hedged by Puritan convictions.

To do the Puritan justice, however, he never claimed to be an apostle of civil and religious liberty other than on these terms. He was a zealot, but not a professional one. His faults, moreover, were the inspiration of his time



or a reaction from it; his virtues exceptional ones for his time. He was better, on the whole, than the world around him. His too sentimental admirers have vested him with a cloak of false glory he ill needed. Take it off and you discover a plain suit of homespun which became him better, which was his real, not fancied, contribution to posterity, and which was worthy of all respect and admiration.

To begin with, he had convictions and the courage to maintain them; moral commodities too rare in any market. He was brave as the Devil, and would have waged war in heaven, too, had he believed it to be run by Episcopalians. Cromwell's Ironsides, a company, as he himself said, of "poor ignorant men," routed the royal cavalry at Marston Moor, and led by "plain men made captains of horse" scattered Charles's army to the winds at Naseby, singing psalm tunes while His Frustrated Majesty hopelessly begged his defeated troopers for "one charge more."

And the Puritan was quite as courageous in the pursuits of peace, as witness his early struggles to live in an unfriendly wilderness. He was thrifty because he had to be to live at all, at home or abroad. He knew the benefits of education because he had had very little of it. The men mentally prominent among the thoroughgoing Puritans could be counted on the fingers. But what was most im-



portant of all, he was capable; for the hands that held the Puritan weapons were hands apt to the trowel, loom and plow, the saw and hammer, the forge and mine and quarry. His true glory—and it has always been more truly England's glory than the glory of her courts and conquests—was in his craftsmanship.

Here, then, is our real heritage from the Puritan; he brought his skill and independence and enterprise and indomitable persistence to the land of his adoption, and made them part of it. He stamped ineffaceably on New England a character and conscience in workmanship which has endured while time's ceaseless tide has swept away the last vestige of his hatred for prayer-books and plum-pudding, his scorn for Christmas, and his sterile hope of extinguishing the fires of human nature.

The man who brings a harvest from the ground, wins a habitation from a jealous land, puts a roof over those he loves, clothes and feeds his fellows, and leaves them the blessings of peace and plenty, enlightenment and occupation, is a nearer and more inspiring image of his Creator than the one who turns ancient superstition into wordy dogma, sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind. The stonecutters of the Middle Ages were finer theologians than the bishops; and if you were to seek for a better Puritan preacher than Cotton Mather, you could



easily have found one in the nearest Puritan blacksmith. You couldn't have made him believe it, but he was.

Democracies were no new things before the Mayflower, nor need it even be admitted that a democracy is the most admirable form of government, except in theory. But independence is essential to any state except a craven serfdom, and men, not means, are the first and last resort of civil liberty and political administration. Puritan manliness and independence were actualities which stamped themselves indelibly on history, while the Puritan Commonwealth was only a mistaken political example of their application. The Puritan Commonwealth itself fell with the passing of the man who made it; but the spirit of Marston Moor echoed in the muskets of Bunker Hill, and shone on the bayonets of the Northern regiments at Gettysburg.

The scorn of the English for what Dr. Johnson denounced as a "race of convicts who ought to be thankful for anything we allow them short of hanging," and of the Southerners who called our farmers and mechanics "whitewashed slaves," was based on the feudal idea of the worthlessness of labor except for the support of a leisured ruling class, and was as far as the poles from New England belief and practice. And not so long ago New Englanders were being quite as curiously pictured



to the rest of the country as plethoric bankers who held the land in mortgage from the Berkshires to the Pacific, living in indolent enjoyment of their stranglehold. The fact is, of course, that, rich or poor, the New Englander is still in spirit a craftsman or a trader. No one, perhaps, knows less than he the art of taking life easily; he must forever be doing or making or selling something.

The apothegm of Sancho Panza, "the tool to the hand of the one who can use it," never fitted more appropriately than in the case of New England and the Puritan. Here was a land as if expressly made for the small landholder, the hardy sailor, the mechanic and artisan, and the soul of enterprise and independence. Abundant rivers, lavish in water-power, and affording ideal sites for cities; a rugged coast line, broken by a hundred harbors of resort or refuge; dense spreading forests, long rolling uplands with perfect pasturage, a myriad clear, fresh lakes, vast stores of stone and metal, and rapid avenues of communication, combined in an abounding natural wealth and resource to encourage and enrich the man who was willing to work for a living, and who knew how to apply his willingness.

Life was hard at first; it ameliorated under intelligent pioneering; it has grown under agricultural, manufacturing, commercial, economic and educational advance-



ment to a standard equalled in but few places, and excelled by none.

What the Puritan began, the Yankee, his direct descendant, continued and improved; the immigration of Gaul and Gael, of Saxon, Slav and Latin, has caught the strange infection, despised alike by radical and reactionary, of working for a living, and our present-day New England, richer than ever in performance and in possibilities, is the result.

The Yankee was, indeed, a type as distinct as the Puritan. Making due allowances for the prejudices of Diedrich Knickerbocker, his description has some salt of accuracy: "a long-sided, raw-boned, hardy race of whalers, woodcutters, fishermen, peddlers, and strapping corn-fed wenches; confident in the protection of Providence, and relying as cheerfully on their own resources." The Yankee could make everything he wanted, and more; he could find or build means to carry the excess to the world's markets, and he knew how to sell it or "swap" it when he got it there. His whaling ships scoured the seven seas; his clippers bore in their swift white wings his cargoes of rum and Bibles, lumber and mixed manifests of everything, fetching and carrying everywhere. A born trader, a keen judge of human wants and human nature, a thrifty householder, instinctive workman, and



intrepid trail-blazer, seeking always, like the Athenians, some new thing; and democratically governing himself—as they, for all their intelligence, could not do—by town meeting, he glutted Europe, Asia and Africa with “Yankee notions,” raised the wheat of Kansas, and dug the gold of California; doing anything, and as long as he was doing something, caring very little what.

Every spindle, every lathe that turns in New England today, hums as much with the momentum of his indefatigable industry as by its own mechanical impulse. The first cotton factory in New England, established at Pawtucket Falls by Samuel Slater in 1790, was equipped with machinery which its founder built from memory. If he couldn’t have remembered it, he would probably have invented it, and the work would have gone on just the same.

New England regiments were a byword in the Civil War; no matter what had to be done, from building a bridge to running a locomotive, men could be found in them to do it. If they didn’t know how when they started, they found out while they were at it; if they didn’t do it the accepted way, they did it nevertheless, and it served equally well. Custom and tradition meant nothing to a race who had been forced for generations to do without them, and to meet circumstances as they arose. A rebellion by a landed aristocracy against skilled free



labor was hopeless from the start; the gun and sword are weak opponents for the forge and hammer. They cannot even be made unless Tubal Cain, the anvil lord, consents to make them.

In the decade previous to the Civil War, New England had definitely concluded the economic process which had gradually been transforming her from a community preponderantly agricultural to a community preponderantly mechanic and commercial. Her dense and rapidly growing population centered in her cities, and the vast movement of modern manufacture, with its advantages and disadvantages, and its increasing problems, definitely began. The same process has taken place in England till she can no longer feed herself; it is well under way, as the last census disconcertingly shows, in America as a whole. For many years, New England's abandoned farms were a growing difficulty, but this is now dissolving in their occupation by hardy farmers of European stock to whom Puritan and Cavalier are names unknown. The problem for the next generation the earth around will be food, and dense populations will be the first to feel its pressure. If there is a coming tendency toward a readjustment of population from the city to the country, food will be the cause and incentive, here as elsewhere.





The skilled labor for which New England is distinguished today is, to be sure, not the skilled labor of the Puritan Commonwealth. Then, the weaver wove on his own loom, and the artisan of whatever type was more largely an individual, working at his own task, and judged by his single product. The era of machine production drew the workman to the city, and made him part of a vast organization, involving a change in the conditions of human existence so great and so fundamental that society is not yet completely adjusted to it, and scarcely sees how to arrange the proportion of work and reward in it with justice to all.

But the spirit of a craftsman is to do the work well however it is done, and this is still distinctly the spirit of New England craftsmanship. As anyone will tell you who sells to New Englanders, its population wants the best, and will be satisfied with nothing else. They know quality, for quality is their stock in trade.

The list of representative New England products and industries is too extensive, and too well known, to need elaboration here. New England textiles in cotton, woolen and worsted, boots and shoes, hats, clothing, furniture, rugs and carpets, pianos, watches, machinery, jewelry and silverware, pulp, paper, talc, paint, rubber goods, metal goods, granite, slate and marble, timber, canned



foods, potatoes, apples, toys, and books are familiar from sun to sun as staples of outstanding merit; and though Michigan may make the most, New England makes the finest automobiles in America. Her fishing industry is, and always has been, in a class by itself for both quantity and quality. The “Yankee” alarm clock rings the Laplander up to milk his reindeer, and the Zulu chief proudly exhibits his Connecticut penknife as his especial treasure. The earth is full of the labor of New England, and is everywhere the better for it.

One can hardly call the printing press a Yankee notion, for it came with the Reformation, but of that movement Puritanism was a part. The printing press has also been the chief agent of material progress and education, and of those advantages the Puritan was a foremost sponsor. The type case and the college came hand in hand to New England, and have more than distinguished it. No form of skilled labor calls for greater accuracy, precision, and knowledge than the printing craft, whose service to commerce as well as to every other human endeavor has been incalculable. It is a source of pride to every New England printer that he is a workman serving workman, and a torchbearer of the Puritan heritage in its most exacting field.

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